Federal Accessibility Legislation Consultations

Submission by the PEI Chapter of the Canadian Hard of Hearing Association
December 8, 2016 in Charlottetown

About the Organization
The PEI Chapter of the Canadian Hard of Hearing Association, established in 2001, is a non-profit organization and a chapter of the National Organization that advocates for the Hard of Hearing in Canada.

Hearing loss is invisible to the outside world, and it can be difficult for others to appreciate that hearing loss is a disability. As an organization, we access material and professionals to learn about our invisible disability and we strive to adopt strategies to assist all of the hard of hearing on Prince Edward Island to have the best possible communication tools to be able to communicate.

As a chapter, our mandate is to:

- engage in advocacy issues for the hard of hearing
- hold regular meetings with guest speakers on hearing related issues
- foster speech reading classes

Background
In the recent Stats Canada Health Report of November 16, 2016, “Hearing difficulties and feelings of social isolation among Canadians 45 or older”, it was noted that hearing difficulties are associated with age, and therefore, a growing public health concern as Canada’s population ages. For women, hearing difficulties were found to be associated with social isolation, usually described as loneliness. Social isolation, in turn, is associated with reduced health-related quality of life, increased morbidity, and mortality. Hearing loss and associated communication difficulties can interfere with social activities and integration, leading to social isolation if people withdraw to avoid the challenge of following conversations or embarrassment over their hearing loss or use of a hearing aid. (See http://www.statcan.gc.ca/pub/82-003-x/2016011/article/14671-eng.htm)

Stats Canada reported results from the 2012 and 2013 Canadian Health Measures Survey (CHMS) showed that 20% of adults aged 19 to 79 years had at least mild hearing loss in at least one ear. The CHMS survey further noted that hearing loss is more prevalent as age increases, with 47% of those 60 to 79 more likely to have hearing problems, compared to 16% of adults aged 40 to 59, and 7% aged 19 to 39. In addition, 5% of children and youth aged six to 18 have at least mild hearing loss in one or sometimes both ears. (See http://www.statcan.gc.ca/pub/82-625-x/2015001/article/14156-eng.htm).

Not all people who are hard of hearing will self-identify, making it difficult at times to be able to recognize signs of hearing loss and be able to discreetly accommodate the hard of hearing, as needed. The 2012 and 2013 Canadian Health Measures Survey (CHMS) noted that “the majority of Canadians with measured hearing loss were not aware they had any hearing problems. About 70% of adults with measured hearing loss did not report any diagnosis by a health care professional, while the same occurred in 83% of children and youth.”
Key Questions we’d like to be addressed in Federal Accessibility Legislation, as it relates to the Hard of Hearing:

1. What are the main barriers to accessibility that Canadians with hard of hearing disabilities face?
2. What would it take to fix those barriers?
3. How can we change attitudes?

Main Barriers to Accessibility that Canadians with Hard of Hearing Disabilities Face

1. One important barrier to accessibility is the misperception that hard of hearing and deaf are equivalent terms. They are not. The requirements needed by the deaf community and the hard of hearing are different. The only issue they have in common is that of communication. People who are hard of hearing communicate orally, and need some accommodations in order to do so effectively. This differs from deaf people, who use sign language (ASL) to communicate, as they are unable to hear. A common barrier faced by the hard of hearing is the assumption that all hard of hearing use sign language. This is not true, any more than all people who have vision impairment use Braille to communicate. Most people with vision impairment do not – they wear glasses, rely on large fonts or large print text, talking books, described video on TV, etc. Similarly, the hard of hearing rely on hearing aids, cochlear implants, sound amplification devices, texting and text based communication, speech reading, closed captioning for TV programs and movies, and real time captioning for events such as these consultations.

2. A second barrier to accessibility is that hearing loss, at first glance, is an invisible disability. Unlike a person in a wheelchair, or using a cane, it’s difficult to immediately see if someone is hard of hearing. While many will wear a hearing aid, or have a cochlear implant, it is not always noticeable, particularly in women, whose hairstyles may cover the hearing aids or cochlear implants. When a disability is “invisible”, it is not always recognized as a legitimate disability, and therefore it can be a struggle to remove barriers to communication. Further, hearing loss can be misinterpreted as dementia, learning disability, or attention deficit disorder, as the symptoms can be similar – examples include withdrawal from others, lack of understanding of what is said. These barriers include noisy restaurants where the acoustics amplify sound and where the background music is too loud to make conversations understandable, airport announcements that are not understandable, and pilot to passenger announcements in aircraft that also are not understandable.

3. A third barrier to accessibility is the cost of hearing aids and the ongoing cost of batteries to keep them functional. Hearing aids have a useful shelf life of up to 5 or 6 years, when they will need to be replaced as hearing levels diminish. One hearing aid costs about $3,000, so if you need two hearing aids, that’s a significant investment. A battery lasts about a week. Many hearing aid firms have promotions where the cost of hearing aids are covered for three years, but after that period, the hard of hearing person is faced with the decision of paying for batteries for the life of the hearing aid, or buying new hearing aids. While there are programs for children who need hearing aids, and a
program for adults under 65, at present, there is little to help seniors, many of whom are on fixed incomes, to help with the cost of hearing aid purchase and maintenance. Veterans quite rightly have a program to cover these costs.

3. The cost of hearing aids and the barriers to communication lead to another barrier of accessibility. Many people who are hard of hearing start to become socially isolated, largely due to their hearing difficulties. It is exhausting and can be both embarrassing and frustrating to constantly ask people to repeat themselves. Going to events such as concerts, church services, parties, can be a nightmare when it’s difficult to understand what is being said. In many instances therefore, it is easier to stay home, not matter how lonely. Social isolation can lead to other health related issues, including depression. There are various solutions for public places to accommodate the hard of hearing, such as closed and open captioning services and wiring of public buildings with induction loops.

Recommendations For Fixing Barriers to Accessibility

1. Require medical personnel, including nursing home staff, to have seniors test for hearing loss before undergoing tests for dementia.

2. Require new born screening of infants, for hearing issues, some of which may be congenital.

3. Support the Canadian Hard of Hearing Association’s chapters and branches throughout Canada in promoting awareness of hearing loss issues. Hard of hearing is a chronic condition. It doesn’t improve, but tends to go in a downward spiral. Several have no choice but to have a cochlear implant.

4. Provide financial support for the cost of hearing aids and batteries. On PEI, we help with various conditions, such as medications for seniors and a catastrophic drug plan for islanders. Financial support for the cost of hearing aids and batteries can be a tool to especially help maintain the independence of seniors or those living alone, prevent depression and other problems related to social isolation, and provide a way to be socially active and integrated into communities.

5. Support the Canadian Hard of Hearing Association’s chapters and branches in providing closed and/or captioning services in public venues such as theatres, airports, public facilities. Support the use of induction loops in concert halls, courtrooms, and other public gathering spaces.

6. Recognize that tools to aid in communication such as hearing aids and cochlear implants are only tools. Unlike glasses which can correct vision, these tools do not correct hearing, merely help to amplify sound to give a hard of hearing person a chance to hear more.
7. Promote the use of audio frequency induction loop systems, usually referred to as looping. Looping systems can connect directly with hearing aids equipped with telecoils. In a situation such as a concert, speech, or at a bank or pharmacy counter, the internal microphone of the hearing aid can be turned off, eliminating background noise and letting the wearer of the hearing aid concentrate directly on what is being said. Looping systems can be used in small areas such as information kiosks and bank counters, as well as large areas such as meeting rooms, stadiums, and airports.

To help illustrate the need for looping systems, below are links to two short YouTube videos that demonstrate what a person hears with or without a looping system:

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Ahbz0VvlZF0
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_3XoVrUjfaY

8. Improve accessibility by:

- Requiring better signage in public places such as government offices and airports, such as non-acoustic alerting and notification systems.
- Encouraging businesses to include quiet areas in restaurants such as enclosed booths, provide looping counters in service areas such as banks, pharmacies, doctors’ offices. Perhaps grants can be provided to businesses to help defray the relatively moderate costs of accessibility.
- Looking at changes to building codes to ensure good acoustics and noise control are part of building design.
- Providing more real-time captioning at public events. This will make events more accessible to all.
- Helping the CRTC to demand better captioning of television programs, including the news. While many channels to have programs with closed captioning, the stations can be very lax in ensuring that the captioning matches the video. It is our understanding that the captioning and the video come in separately to the channel, resulting in many programs having captioning that is unrelated to the video. As well, many close captioned programs are very sloppily done, with errors and typos, which can make it difficult to understand what is going on. News programs use open captioning. Some channels, such as BBC Canada, do not have captioning for their news programs.
- Considering the use of captioned telephones (CapTel) in which users of the phone can not only listen to the caller but also read the written captions on the phone’s display window. This service has been available in the USA since 2003, but for some reason, it is not available in Canada.
- Requiring that all phones and cell phones sold in Canada are compatible with hearing aids that have a telecoil.
The Canadian Hard of Hearing Association, PEI Chapter
- Formed 2001
- Engages in advocacy for the hard of hearing
- Holds regular meetings with guest speakers on hearing related topics
- Fosters speech-reading classes

How We Can Change Attitudes

Helen Keller wrote that blindness separates people from things but hearing loss separates people from people. The hard of hearing truly understand the significance of that quote! Many find that their quality and enjoyment of life is marred by their inability to hear effectively. We are a social culture and an essential part of our existence is the social interaction with others. When that thread becomes frayed we are unable to hear what is being said and too often begin to withdraw from uncomfortable situations to avoid embarrassment and humiliation. As a result, studies show that people begin to isolate themselves from the activities that enrich their lives. This leads to a host of health related issues, including depression, and the problem is complicated by the fact that the cost of hearing aids is a huge deterrent.

- Help the hard of hearing to maintain dignity and independence by making accessibility for the hard of hearing an integral part of any barrier free access program.

- Promote hearing health programs to encourage people to be tested for hearing loss. We do this with other forms of prevention and early detection, such as mammograms, colorectal cancer, eye and dental exams, as just a few exams.

- Many employed people refuse to acknowledge hearing loss because they fear, rightly or wrongly, that there is a stigma for being hearing impaired, and see acknowledging hearing loss as a career limiting move. Not that long ago, we had the same time of stigma for people with cancer. Thankfully that has changed. Now we need to help the hard of hearing to let their voices be heard by removing the perceived stigma that hearing loss means a loss of ability.

One Final Note

We request that the Federal Accessibility Legislation be kept as simple as possible. We ask that the overarching principles be set, with the details later included in the regulations. If the proposed Act gets too deep into details, it may be difficult to move it forward. The proposed Act will be the foundation body, which will affect the regulations not only for this Act but for other Acts.

One key point we respectfully ask you to remember is that the current Acts do not keep up with technological advances. Therefore, please allow for some room to change regulations as new technology arrives to help the hard of hearing and other disability groups.

To discuss any of these points, or for further clarification, please do not hesitate to contact the PEI Chapter of the Canadian Hard of Hearing Association at hearpei@gmail.com

Thank you.